



A LECTURE
ON
SOME SIGNS OF THE TIMES,

HELD IN
ST. MATTHEW'S CHURCH, HALIFAX,

ON
SUNDAY MORNING, AUGUST 28th, 1887.

BY
CHARLES MACDONALD, M. A.

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ON

SOME SIGNS OF THE TIMES.

Luke xviii. 8.—“Nevertheless, when the Son of Man cometh, shall He find (the) faith on the earth?”

THE particular connexion of this question with the foregoing parable, I do not clearly see, nor, so far as I can learn, does any other body. It is a question, and it contains a reflection that might well have presented itself to our Lord on many occasions. Considering the great mission He had undertaken, knowing that He came “not to send peace but a sword,” do you imagine that the gloomy view of the future never pressed on His spirit? Was He not preëminently the man of sorrows? Do you suppose He never thought, What if all this labour should fail? What if, though for a time accepted by a few, His words were to come in the future to be neglected, and His works discredited, and faith in Him cease from the earth? I believe that He who was tried in all things like as we are, who trod the wine-press alone, and prayed in His final and consummate agony that the cup of bitterness might pass from Him, had His times of despondency deep and dark, just as he had times of joy pure and unspeakable. The utterance of our text seems to belong to such a desponding time: “When the Son of Man cometh, shall He find faith on the earth?”

What time, or date, or event is meant by “the time when the Son of Man cometh” we do not know. Possibly, it points to some epoch yet in the future, some day of His miraculous appearing, when He comes to begin the Millennium, and bring the Golden age, the dream of the poets, back again. Possibly it indicates that time of general assize when all nations shall appear before Him—that final and unique event in human history described by Paul in the First Epistle to the Thessalonians. Or we may, without relinquishing our claim to Orthodoxy, think, as some good and pious men have done, that the Son of Man has already come, and that even now the world is being judged. But whatever may have been our Lord’s main thought when He expressed Himself in this question, and however

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He would have answered it,—(His answer is not given)—the same question in a modified form may well engage our gravest reflection, especially if His coming is still to be looked for. And the form in which it presents itself is something like this :—Are there among us now any signs or indications traceable that the Christian faith is losing its hold over the hearts and the lives of men in Christian communities ? By the Christian faith I mean that belief as to our Lord's mission and work on earth, which, with differences on minor points, constitutes what is called *Orthodoxy*. Is this Christianity on the whole gaining or losing ground ? If there are no signs of losing, all is well ; but if there are—and I think there are some bad omens—all is not well ; and it is right for us to ask ourselves, If so, why so ? and is there any cure, or precaution against the looming evil ? Or must we painfully look forward to some time—say 20,000 years hence—when, the Son of Man not having yet come, our present Christianity will be only recorded in history as a great moral and religious force that moved and raised mankind, so many centuries back, and then yielded slowly to the corroding forces of time ? There are people, bad only in a theological sense, who seem to think thus. There are those who are asking, Is our present Christianity worth preserving ? It is admitted by all that the world is improving, that there is a slow rise of the level of morality among men : like the gradual emergence from the sea of some mighty continent in the vast reaches of geological time : and this upward tendency is most largely due to Jesus of Nazareth. Well ; but what of the special doctrines, which distinguish Christianity as more than a pure, ideal morality ? Will it, as including these, be able to hold its ground, and satisfy the wants and the aspirations of men ? This is the kind of question that some are asking and doubting of the answer.

GOOD OMENS.

One thing is clear enough : Christianity is spreading into the heathen world. The success of foreign missions has been so great during the present generation as to remind us of the rapid diffusion of the gospel over the heathen world in the Apostolic age and that which followed it. This consideration, familiar to us all, may well put us in good heart, and make us feel that the grand prophecies of old are coming to fulfilment : for the kingdoms of this world are becoming the kingdoms of our Lord and of His Christ.

It is also evident, as I have already said, that the moral influences of Christianity are extending in society already professedly Christian. Social vices and crimes of all kinds do indeed abound; political and commercial rascalities might even in some communities seem to be on the increase; but this increase may, at least in part, be accounted for by the greater vigilance with which they are watched, and the greater publicity that follows them when found out; and also by the rise in the moral standard by which they are judged: many things in conduct being once held tolerable and defensible, that are now considered below the moral level, and hence disgraceful. All this is well, though not so well as we could wish. Let us look now at some less cheering facts.

OPPOSING INFLUENCES.

Among the masses of our people, especially in the large centres of population and industry, a growing indifference to religion is so marked as to be beyond dispute. This, however to be explained, is the melancholy fact. From all sides we hear that large numbers of the lower classes are growing up in heathenish ignorance; or, if they have any opinions in connection with religion, these are merely rude forms of Atheism. As to the outward ordinances of religion—*e. g.* Lord's Day observances—these have fallen, and are falling into neglect, perhaps contempt. New anti-christian spectres have started into sight, socialism, secularism, communism, and other-isms: which, whether they are wholly delusive or not, have their able defenders on the platform and in the press, and their followers by the thousand and ten thousand. The apostles of these new and revolutionary ideas have this advantage over us, that they appeal to the immediate interests and desires of their followers, which the most ignorant cannot but understand—indeed they understand little else. Their talk is of the material; and if man were an animal and nothing more, they would have the best of it. It is against these subterranean forces, this moral dynamite, that Home Missions and other Christian agencies are conducting an unequal struggle. The outlook, from this point of view is not very cheering.

But there is another influence at work among reading thinking people of all classes. That is the *influence of modern scientific thought on the interpretation of the Bible*. That influence is such that it is likely to modify, if not to destroy, some of our common and traditional ideas regarding the Book of Books. Nay, with many

it has done so already. The results of scientific enquiry in many departments of knowledge—in Astronomy, Geology, History, Antiquities, Language, in all that relates to nature and to man—achieved in this century, are many and marvellous, and can only be rejected after being disproved. Able and conscientious men, many of them at least, apply these results to the Bible: men, by their previous studies specially fitted for the work they undertake. They find that in many of its statements, the Bible does not agree with science, with history, or with—whatever the subject of their special knowledge may be. They publish for the consideration of the reading and thinking public, their conclusions with the grounds on which they have been led to form them. To accuse them of “the evil heart of unbelief,” of “enmity to God,” of “pride of reason,” of striving to be “wise above what is written,” and all that—is to play the part of peevish children. The best of them speak and write, if not truly, at least truthfully, and with much more of the modest and gentle spirit of Christianity than many of those who venture to oppose them. (Truth can always afford to be calm.) A cheap printing-press brings their writings to our tables and into our hands. Thus, the opinions of the most able and competent men on these important topics come to all of us who have eyes to read and ears to hear: and we are brought face to face with opinions and discussions which fifty years ago would not have been mooted; and yet earlier would have cost their authors the pillory or the stocks; and still further back—the stake.

Astronomy, you know, after the fiercest opposition which mainly came from the Church, won its great victory some two hundred years ago, when it had at last to be conceded that the *steadfast earth did move*. In the memory of some of us, Geology has won its less fiercely contested battle; since it is now allowed that the earth is much more than six thousand years old, and the six days of creation, according to the Bible narrative, are explained to be not *our* days, but vast periods of time, each exhibiting its own special creation: although even from this explanation Geology does not withdraw her threatening hand. I mention these two subjects, because they are so well known; but there are some others.

From all which it would seem that a fresh estimate of the Bible is likely soon to be forced on even the most orthodox of us. All this is very serious, specially to those who have been brought up in the severest traditions.

I know that many connected with this congregation are thoughtful and anxious about these grave results. They know that I am not overstating the case one jot : that our present beliefs about the Bible, which is so bound up with Christianity, are assailed from various points of view. And it seems to them that our Lord's question is even now beginning to receive the answer *No*, and that faith in Him is failing from the earth.

To such persons I would not say, "Shut your eyes : close your ears : stand firm in what you have been taught." The bird that is said to hide its head in the sand to evade approaching danger, is not held to be a model of intelligence ; and the faith that is maintained by refusing to consider the grounds of our belief, is irrational and borders on the immoral. "I believe, because it is impossible," *may* have been the utterance of a saint ; it is very likely to have been that of a fool.

TRUTH MUST ALWAYS BE FOR OUR GOOD.

To me this canvassing of old opinion, however hallowed, if conducted in the reverent spirit which is here most due, is one of the guarantees of a good future for men. The being willing to part from an error however dear, to accept a truth however distasteful, is a frame of mind that God, who Himself is truth, cannot but approve. For truth is light and life. To take things for granted, no question asked, is darkness and death. What gives *our* religion the superiority over other systems of religion is its truth ; it satisfies the tests men apply when they are seeking for truth. At least we think so. You do not ask a heathen to become a christian without giving him reasons for the desired change. If you say "Just take it on my word," he would do well to turn away from you. It is the desire to find the truth that makes us blameless ; and the dull, lazy, or frivolous following of the opinions of our surroundings because they are respectable and nice, and cost nothing—this is giving up the chief part of our distinction over the beasts of the field. We know that society is gregarious in its opinions ; the more reason is there to pity society if it cannot be stirred into thought. So, I say to you who are troubled by the conflict of theological opinion, "Wait, think, enquire." Don't expect that doubts and difficulties will roll away like morning mist before the advancing sun. Some doubts and difficulties will, perhaps ; but some may remain. Yet, as a time of fog and obscurity does not

hinder men from their daily work, so doubts about some things need not bate an iota of our discharge of our practical Christian duties. But—to keep more closely to our subject—so far as I see, there is no serious danger to Christianity arising from increased knowledge of the Bible, its contents, and its construction. The Bible lost none of its influence with men when Galileo and Newton taught us that the sun, not our earth, was the central body of our planets. It came to be seen, after the struggle for existence ended in favour of the new idea, that nature in the Bible is described in the ordinary language of speech-gifted men. Geology has not impaired the value of the Bible. It has merely gone to shew what Astronomy did in part; that God, in granting a revelation to men, permitted the writers of the books of the Bible to use their natural faculties, gather such information as they could, and write the best they knew. The spiritual power of the Bible is still what it was. Nay, more; it is increasing among serious-minded people. The Bible will gain rather than lose power with men as we come to understand it in its true character, if we do not so understand it already. And whatever the criticism of learning and science may do with historical and antiquarian details, and the authorships and genuineness of this Book and that, I believe that far above all will stand the unapproachable moral elevation and grandeur of our Lord's character, to be revered, loved, and adored; to be a perpetual stimulus, guide, and pattern of what human nature ought to strive after, and to be! This, to all the coming races of men. And this, if the world last, will go on while ages march past, and till the cooling suns are quenched in darkness. And the Son of man—come he now, or soon, or late—*will* find faith on the earth. That is my belief.

The dangers to Christianity do not arise from increased knowledge of scripture things. Neither do they spring from the other cause I have alluded to, the present growing neglect of religion among large bodies of the poorer working classes in all Christian countries. Among them irreligion and the prevalence of revolutionary ideas are largely due to their social condition, their few enjoyments, their endless toils and privations in a grinding and hopeless poverty that makes life not worth living: "forsaken of God: nothing to be thankful for." Let them be warmed, and fed, and clothed, and have some reasonable attainable hope to brighten their days; then the religious nature that is in us all will assert itself. Improved social arrangements, better

laws, more equal distribution of wealth and the proceeds of labour, would go a very long way to raise them from their present indifference or enmity, and revive them into the fear and even the love of God ; which our present social conditions, pressing them down with such pitiless weight, may almost be their complete excuse for having abandoned and forgotten.

My fears for Christianity are not connected with the two causes mentioned ; which, so far as they are real, are probably temporary. My fears connect themselves rather with our religious teachers than with our people ; with our *clergy*, rather than the *laity* as they call us. Our foes, our unintentional but worst foes, are those of our own household, holding high position therein.

CERERICAL PRETENSIONS.

The first of these fears arises from the claim which the great churches of Christendom lay to the possession of supernatural powers or functions. These are the Roman and the Greek churches, each of which has a divine head in confidential communication with Heaven. The divine power resident in the princes of the church, variously explained and defended, has always been among their tenets, and has formed the basis of their theory of themselves as expounded to the people. At the Reformation, the church of England rejected the grosser applications of this theory, but did not renounce the theory itself. Yet the *High Church* doctrine fell into abeyance in England, no doubt in deference to the simple practical sense of the people, till about fifty years ago it began to revive. Since that time it has been growing ; and though still a minority in England, including neither the ablest nor the wisest of clergy or laity—no leaders of thought, so far as I know—the party is now very considerable, from its zeal rather than its numbers. The authority, power, and *prestige* of “The Church” are being dragged into their medieval prominence. We are invited by these high-toned clerics, in other words, to return to the religious condition of Europe in the middle ages—say, six or seven centuries ago—before the outrages of lawless clerical power had aroused the disgust and wrath of whatever in Western Europe was left of liberty and moral sense. Each of these churches says to the other, “You are quite wrong ; your followers are damned ; the true way rests with me and me only.” This consideration might well make a man pause before joining himself to any of them ; since the odds are much

against his choosing the right one. To the dispassionate onlooker it would only be matter of amusement, were it not for the sorrow he felt that the simple, the divine teachings of Jesus of Nazareth could be drivelled and dwarfed down to this, and made still to pass current in His name!

But now respecting this "Church" theory—which seems to me to eliminate from Christianity all that is worth having—not to press the argument that the opposing claims of the High Episcopal churches destroy each other; let us state the pretensions of the Church of England's popular party, as certified by their priests.

That the Bishop is the representative, the plenipotentiary, of the apostle; who has derived, through holy office and by the imposition of holy hand, certain occult spiritual powers which he transmits downwards by ordination to the priests of the church, who thereafter operate upon the faithful. "The Church" is in fact the clergy; it is a sacred order, standing in a relation to God that no other body of Christians and no other individual can possibly occupy. All gifts and graces come through "the Church." "The Church" admits that Christ is "the way and the truth," but "the Church" keeps the wicket of entrance to the narrow path. "The Church" has the monopoly of Heaven's favour, and her ordinances are blessed and accepted; while the same services, offered with sincerity and devotion by those who are without, are rejected and unblest. The personal character of the priest has nothing to do with the efficacy of his services. He may be a saint; he may be a reprobate; the Spirit is with him all the same. When it is asked, "Whence shall our salvation come?" it is answered, "Through the Church." What shall it profit a man if he gain the whole world, and spend and be spent in doing good and communicating of good, if he has not belonged to the Church! (I do not exaggerate.)

In the life and conduct of its followers "the Church" has never been able, so far as I know, to point to any evidence that these claims and pretensions are real. It has never said that its ordinances make men better, holier, more Christ-like than those who have not had the advantage of them. It could hardly be seriously contended that a Roman Catholic or a Church of England man, of average type, is a higher style of man, of more blameless life, of stauncher integrity, of purer Christian motive and action than another average man whom he would call a *heretic* or a *dissenter*. Yet surely something like this

is true, and some corresponding proof ought to be forthcoming, if Church operation and ministration are so vital. "By their fruits ye shall know them," seems a sound principle to go by. But in this case there are no fruits, else we should have had them pointed out. The barren fig-tree only is suggested to our minds.

Now I say, this unproved, unproveable, but—in our time and place—much bruited claim set up and maintained by our priests, makes me fear for the near future of Christianity. Reasonable men will not long continue to believe or regard it. Perhaps, outside the clergy themselves, there are not many thinking well-informed men who do so even now. Many are tolerating the pretensions of the clergy on the principle that "it pleases them and doesn't hurt us"; and affirm that their *laissez-faire* is true wisdom. But this will not last long. A theory or belief that cannot justify itself by practical substantial proof; still more, if it has no *shew* even of practical proof—will be washed away by the restless and rising tide of question and enquiry characteristic of our age.

I know this priestly claim has arguments in its favour: scriptural arguments, historical arguments, such as they are; but such there have been for many delusions that have long swayed mankind, and then vanished away. Example: *Witchcraft*. That delusion held its place in the world till quite recent times; in New England till little over a hundred years ago. The Church had believed it from the beginning; in the middle ages the Church fostered it; it was a "real manifestation of the power of Satan on the earth." This reality was maintained eloquently, scripturally, convincingly; and facts of a kind were produced in evidence. Consult the relevant history, and you will find that I overstate nothing. But the superstition could not bear strict examination; *scriptural proofs could not save it*; and it was at length, after being the cause of incalculable cruelty and other evil, remanded to the limbo of vanities and lies.

The *sacerdotal idea*, familiarly known to students of heathen literature, it can hardly be doubted, will in like manner perish; but Christianity itself may for a time be involved in its ruins. It has begun to be so already. The intelligent classes in Western Europe, where Roman Catholicism is dominant, have already very largely turned away from it; and *no religion at all* has come for the time to be the prevalent belief. The deference or tolerance shewn to it is mainly due to the fact that the Pope, with his backing of clergy, is still

a mighty political force. So, though for not quite the same reasons, the Church of England can now be called, only in a Parliamentary sense, the Church of the English people. This is admitted by its warmest supporters. No friend of that Church, keeping his eyes and ears open, can help fearing for the future. As the idea grows, by reason of High Church pretensions, that one part of Christianity is unbelievable, namely, the divine powers of the clergy—men will say, and are even now saying, "If this is a sample of Christianity, we care not for it. If this is the first and necessary article of belief, we decline to have anything to do with it. We prefer to go by the light of nature, which alone so many admirable characters have been obliged to put up with, and take our chance with God."

HOSTILITY TO SCIENCE.

Another fear I have for Christianity, though less than this, is the attitude of enmity and anathema taken up by many of our religious teachers towards what they call *science*. Nor is this danger slight. Such teachers—whatever their standing—I look on as clerical culprits; and I am sorry to say they are often popular ones. From their depraved instructions we, in this congregation, are wisely exempted; except, it may be, from some transient preacher who thinks to regale our ears with pleasant words.

Their enmity to science doubtless arises from their passionate devotion to the ordinary and traditional beliefs concerning the Bible, and to the fact already stated, (of which they are dimly conscious) that some of these beliefs must be modified, as some have already been modified, by the sure conclusions of modern science. In condemning science they quote the authority of the Scriptures themselves. In their armoury of texts the chief one is found in the end of Paul's first letter to Timothy, in which the apostle bids him to "avoid vain babblings and the oppositions of *science* falsely so called." Now it ought to be known that what we call *science* did not exist among the Jews, not even among the Greeks, a people so much more advanced intellectually; and that the original word has been most unfortunately translated in our New Testament by the word *science*. The original word is of uncertain meaning. It may have denoted a certain Alexandrine philosopher, of which you have heard under the name *Gnosticism*; or it may have meant a kind of learning, much cultivated by Jewish Rabbis, to which Paul refers in his letter to

Titus when he speaks of "foolish questions, and genealogies, and contentions, and strivings about the law." But Paul no more condemned science, in our sense of that word, than he condemned steam navigation.

In condemning the useless and the nonsensical we can all most heartily agree with Paul. But it is difficult to forgive those who, by using a mis-translation, pervert his authority, unless their plea be their own complete ignorance.

For, what is science, this bugbear of so many religionists? Science is merely the facts of nature, in its various departments, arranged and ordered so that our reason can comprehend them. *Facts reduced to principles*; that is science. The student of science has nature, *i. e.*, the works of God for his Bible. From the things that He hath made are clearly seen His eternal power and divinity, and the results of His Will both in time present and in time past. The scientific man may say to the theological man, "I am trying to know something of God on the intellectual side of His character, just as you are studying Him on the moral side. Your sources of information are more fallible than mine. You have a written book, written by various authors, transmitted in copies by men through many ages and by many hands. In my department the writing is by the finger of God himself. Men may deceive, by inattention or by design. But the sun, the skies, the stars, the rocks, the seas, the forests do not deceive. Possibly, we cannot read them; but, if and when we can, they tell us the truth. My studies and labours *may be* as religious as yours." There may be a great deal of speculation in science that has a very slender foundation in fact; but so there may be, and so there is, in theology. Let us not single out *science* for our special reprobation.

And, then again, don't we all live on the good fruits of science? Science is the forerunner and mistress of invention. Science gives us command over the forces of nature; invention applies it to improve the conditions of human life, to multiply blessings and comforts, and raise us out of the savage state. True, science may be turned to bad uses. There are inventions that perhaps are positive evils. But the benefits conferred on us by science far out-balance these. As well denounce education, of which science is coming to be by far the largest part. Can the people who do so think what it is they are saying? Are they ready to say, "Let God in the Bible, as we understand it, be true, but God in nature be found everywhere a liar?"

As against science itself, anathemas are vain. It is man's nature to inquire, to seek knowledge, to build up his knowledge into theories. Criticism and controversy destroy false theories, and establish those which stand the tests of truth. This is a law of human progress as certain as that of the tides or the seasons. You can no more destroy science than you can turn the moon out of its course or change the axis of the earth. You may oppose successfully some particular opinion of some particular man of science; that is quite another thing. But do not revile science in general; *don't revile at all*. More idle are scolding words than the surges that fume and hiss round the base of the sea-beaten rock.

Great is my fear for the evil influence of our popular pulpit foes of science. Many look on them with contempt. I do not. They also, like the priestly claimants of divine powers, tend to repel from Christianity fair-minded and reasonable men. Young people, whose ardour for scientific knowledge is one of the sure proofs of a generous mind, and one of the best auguries of a useful and honourable career in life, turn with wonder and pity—if not anger—from a strain of teaching offensive at once to their understanding and their taste. The leaders of thought do not mind these pulpit-men, but say "They are joined to their idols: let them alone." And the idea is spreading among intelligent people generally, that men so ill-furnished with knowledge and thought as such teachers must be, can have little to say that is worth attending to. So the cause of the gospel suffers, and is suffering even now. For, need I say, society is in the long run governed by the mass of educated opinion within it; and that opinion is determined by knowledge, facts, and the conflicts of discussion. Thus it is that truth, or what men take for truth, is evolved. And just as in the progress of war, "Providence is usually on the side of the heavy battalions," so, in the progress of society, Providence is usually on the side of reason and sense. Denunciations of science must eventually recoil on the utterers of them to the injury of the cause they were, by methods of folly, trying to support. Is this a slight injury to Christianity?

ANOTHER REFORMATION WANTED.

And now, if what has been said be true, or even partly true, what further does it become us to think and to do? Not surely to think that Christianity is dying out, and so going the way of all things

human ; but that we are nearing some great change—not in our religious feelings and aspirations, but—in our theology or our creeds. There was a Reformation 350 years ago which swept over the best part of Europe. What do you say to a second Reformation, in which old and time-hallowed misunderstandings of scripture and of the true place of the Bible, and priestcrafts and idolatries, shall be dismissed to their own place ? and men shall be allowed to behold the glory of God in the one Mediator, Revealer, Saviour, guide ; nothing between man and God but Christ ; a privilege which but a small portion of the Christian world now enjoys. Such a Reformation, in which truth of any kind was not feared, (and who should fear truth but a liar ?) in which all knowledge was welcomed, nature and the Bible were equally claimed as revelations of God, or rather as *containing* revelations of God ; what a load would be taken off many an anxious soul now held in a kind of thralldom ! Then, too, we should see the glory of God in His works, undeterred by the lurking fear that we were sinning against the Bible. And we could admire and adore, without misgiving, the march of that divine energy through the eternal past into the moving present, whose slow majestic tread beats time to the rolling ages, and is the same yesterday, to-day, and forever !

And what are we to do ? to do ? actively speaking. Nothing ; but to wait for the Lord, and to believe that He will bring forth judgment, righteousness, and truth sooner or later, in His own good time, as the light of noonday. The very fact that there are theoretical difficulties in the matter of *belief*, ought, while we patiently wait for the solution of them, to throw us back on what we are sure we can't be wrong in doing—*i. e.*, putting on the body of the Lord Jesus. By this I mean, taking his teaching for our highest instruction, and his life and character for our highest example. We cannot be truly and fully like Christ ; to be that would be to be perfect. No : but by putting before us a lofty pattern and a pure standard of action, we shall be better than we now are, and be ever on the up-grade of improvement.

The gospel is not a curiously devised scheme for sealing and docketing in safety a handful of mankind against the day when the Son of Man shall appear in the divine majesty of cloud and thunder, with sound of angelic trumpet and armies of angels in the celestial train—while the untold millions are sent to their predestined perdition. Not this. It is a God-given spiritual force by which, whoever

takes it into his heart and strives to live thereby, is made meet to be an heir of God and a joint heir with Christ. The life, the work, the teaching, the example of our Lord is the great moral lever by which men are to be raised from selfishness and sin and brought to this state of heirship. Of that we may be sure. Some things in the revelations of the Scriptures or of Nature may remain dark to us : some doubtful : some may be misunderstood. But, following Jesus—not with the empty cry of " Lord, Lord," but with that sincerity which is shewn by doing His will and imitating His goodness—we *cannot* be, we *shall not* be, far from the kingdom of God.



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